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# Chinese-Iranian Mutual Strategic Perceptions

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Sino-Iranian relations and mutual strategic perceptions, highlighting several types of tension in Sino-Iranian ties alongside areas of deeper cooperation. We examine in particular the policy debates about China between conservatives and reformists within Iran, and we compare their views of China to the views of Iran held by Chinese commentators. To that end, we extensively survey both the official media and scholarly literature in Farsi and in Chinese, since each strand reveals different sentiments and is accorded a different degree of openness.

A relatively little-studied debate is under way in the Islamic Republic of Iran between the two main factions of the political elite, conveniently divided into camps of conservatives and reformists, over Iran's relations with the great powers. In these strategic debates, and for different reasons, relations with the People's Republic of China, on the one hand, and the United States, on the other, have loomed large. The outcome of these debates will likely have profound implications for Iran's place in the emerging post-bipolar international order and for how Tehran will project itself regionally and internationally.

With this in mind, this article analyzes Sino-Iranian relations, drawing on a large array of primary sources in both Farsi and Chinese. We will highlight several tiers of tension in Sino-Iranian ties alongside areas of cooperation. In the conclusion, we will draw on our analysis of Chinese and Iranian perceptions, in particular on policy debates between conservatives and reformists within Iran, in a bid to assess how Sino-Iranian relations might fare in the future.

To that end, we have undertaken an extensive survey of the Farsi-language media, teasing out the sentiments and rationales guiding reformist and conservative policy makers in Tehran. The recurrent themes in the Iranian discourse will be cross-referenced with the discourse about Iran inside China, in order to weigh up the validity of optimistic as well as ambivalent strands regarding China's and Iran's current and prospective relations.

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In doing so, we will provide a far more textured and nuanced analysis of Chinese agency in the Middle East and of Sino-Iranian relations in particular.<sup>1</sup> Our approach is framed by a set of critical questions: Might China seek a bolder approach in the Middle East and move beyond deference to American sensitivities in its approach to Iran? Might China's energy-driven interests in Iran become broader and more strategic, and include a substantive military treaty?<sup>2</sup>

### CHINA FROM IRANIAN PERSPECTIVES: OPPORTUNISTIC ECONOMIC PARTNER OR STRATEGIC ALLY?

In the Iranian power structure, political parties do not operate in the same way as in Western parliamentary democracies. Instead, there are camps or alignments each of which consists of several political groups. Broadly speaking, the political factions can be divided into two major groups, the conservatives (*Osulgrayan*) and the moderates and reformists (*Eslahtalaban*), and there is an obvious distinction between their preferences in terms of foreign policy. By analyzing op-ed articles published in several newspapers linked to the conservative and reformist camps, this section will show how these camps perceive China.

In general, several recurrent themes can be discerned in this Iranian discourse on China, which we will reevaluate later based on Chinese sources. These primarily relate to the degree to which China's approach to Iran can be deemed as grounded in "civilizational" solidarity (as seen through largely conservative eyes), or in a purely realistic and opportunistic logic (depicted in most reformist commentaries). The two wings of Iranian politics are at variance over whether, based on China's patchy record of compliance with Western sanctions on Iran, China can be considered a reliable ally that would come to Tehran's rescue if the latter were militarily attacked by the United States. Correspondingly, there are differences between reformists and conservatives over whether Tehran should deepen economic cooperation with China or look instead to European competitors so as to hedge against economic overreliance on Beijing. In addition, a proxy debate is under way about the extent to which China's traditions and worldview can be deemed "Islam-friendly," as argued by Iranian conservatives, or not, as alleged by reformists.

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1. The most important studies to date of China and the Middle East are Yitzhak Shichor, *The Middle East in China's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Hashim S. H. Behbehani, *China's Foreign Policy in the Arab World, 1955–1975* (London: Kegan Paul, 1981); Lillian Craig Harris, *China Considers the Middle East* (London: Tauris, 1993); P. R. Kumaraswamy, *China and the Middle East* (London: Sage, 1999); Jon B. Alterman and John W. Garver, *The Vital Triangle: China, the United States and the Middle East* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2008). The most authoritative study of Sino-Iranian relations is John W. Garver, *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-imperial World* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

2. Manochehr Dorraj and Carrie L. Currier, "Lubricated with Oil: Iran-China Relations in a Changing World," *Middle East Policy* 15, no. 2 (2008): 66–80.

The general view in Iranian reformist newspapers is that China has been pursuing a largely peaceful development strategy in recent decade. This has led to growing Chinese geopolitical clout around the world. Although Chinese leaders have consistently declared that they are not interested in Asian hegemony in order to skirt global tensions, it is obvious that China not only has become a regional hegemon but also an international power. Two reasons have been outlined for China's success. China is cast by the Iranian press as "the factory of the world" as a result of which the European and American markets have been saturated with Chinese products; and the other mainstay of China's economic hegemony is its heavy investments in infrastructure projects on other continents.<sup>3</sup> Despite the reluctance of China to weigh into Middle Eastern problems, its economic growth has almost involuntarily thrust Beijing into the region and has challenged China's earlier efforts to portray itself as having a relatively noninterventionist approach.<sup>4</sup>

According to Iranian reformists, although China views Iran as a powerful political and strategic actor in the heart of the Middle East, its peaceful development policy means that China does not see any country—including Russia—as a strategic partner in the international system. Therefore China, as a realist actor, pursues two main objectives regarding Iran. First, to Chinese leaders, Iran's energy reserves are important for China's economic development. Second, Iran will be geographically important for maintaining the free flow of oil and natural gas in the future.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the presence of American warships in the Strait of Malacca and concerns of a possible future conflict between China and the United States in the Pacific, Beijing is looking for a new way to secure its energy needs. By building a pipeline to bring natural gas from Iran to Pakistan and also developing an Iran-Turkmenistan pipeline, China aims to permanently secure its energy resources. Third, Iranians suspect that the development of defense cooperation between Iran and China is not based on a long-term strategic view in Beijing but rather may end up as a mere bargaining chip in China's political arsenal vis-à-vis the United States, particularly as regards Washington's continuing protection of Taiwan.<sup>6</sup>

China's President Xi Jinping is thought to be eager to develop diplomatic relations with both Shi'a Iran and Sunni rival Saudi Arabia because both countries are the main suppliers of energy for Beijing. Insofar as China cautiously condemns Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen and China's policy toward Syria is closer to Iran's, reformists concede China leans toward the Islamic Republic. However,

3. Hussein Rahdari, "The Chinese Way of Hegemony" [in Farsi], *Donya-e-Eqtesad*, January 31, 2016.

4. Sara Ma'asoumi, "Chinese Anti-Corruption in Tehran" [in Farsi], *Etemaad Daily*, January 23, 2016; also Badamchi Shabestari, "The New Chapter in Tehran-Beijing Relations" [in Farsi], *Iran*, January 25, 2016.

5. Baharat Mohebi, "Revolution in Washington's Foreign Policy" [in Farsi], *Shargh Daily*, August 27, 2015; also Hussein Malaek, "Speculations Regarding Strategic Relations with China" [in Farsi], *Vaghaye Daily*, January 24, 2016.

6. Malaek, "Speculations."

Beijing talks to representatives from both the Syrian government and the opposition and promises to play a more active role in a prospective peace process in Syria. In order to build constructive relations with Arab countries as well as with Iran, Xi Jinping has pledged support for Palestinian statehood and also has allocated aid for the reconstruction of Gaza. For Iranian reformists, what is evident in all of this is that China would do its utmost to avoid taking sides in the region, wishing to see a reduction in the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the role of China in Iran since the beginning of the nuclear sanctions imposed by the West has often provoked among reformists an emotive negative reaction toward Beijing. They argue that China's auxiliary sanctions-enforcement role is consistent with its realist (some say opportunistic) approach. While China remained a key trading partner for Iran throughout the period of US-led economic sanctions, Chinese leaders had agreed to back crucial aspects of the sanctions against Iran from behind the scenes. This is described as a "double game" to China's advantage, enabling it to profitably invest in Iran and for Chinese products to flood the Iranian market. That is why Xi Jinping is perceived as having hastened to visit Tehran in January 2016, so soon after the signing of the Vienna nuclear deal between the West and Iran: to safeguard the dominance of Chinese firms ahead of the reentry of Western corporations.<sup>8</sup>

The reformists suggested that after economic sanctions are fully lifted Tehran would not have to offer Chinese firms preferential terms, as EU investors will be equally keen to do business in Iran: "the Chinese government [will then have to] offer attractive commercial packages to its Iranian partners."<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, Iranian conservatives portray China as a natural strategic partner of the Islamic Republic. For example, the conservative president of the Iran-China Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Asadollah Asgaroladi, argues that Tehran should view Beijing as a long-term ally considering the troubled historical relations between Iran and Western powers. In the wake of the nuclear deal and the possibility of Western investment, Iran should not simply sidetrack ties with China, because historical evidence suggests that the West would aim again to isolate Iran. In other words, the West is perceived by conservatives as an inherently unreliable partner, while reformists yearn for greater Western investment in the Iranian economy, not least so as to lessen reliance on China.<sup>10</sup>

For the conservatives, therefore, the relationship with China has always been fair and equal. Future investments by China in Iran would be a win-win game for

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7. Ma'asoumi, "Chinese Anti-Corruption in Tehran."

8. "Zanganeh Negotiates in Beijing" [in Farsi], *Etemaad Daily*, April 9, 2015.

9. Ali A. Zebardast, "The Advantage of Iran in Trading with China" [in Farsi], *Farhikhtegan Daily*, January 24, 2016.

10. Asadollah Asgaroladi, "Iran and China on the Path of Joint Investment" [in Farsi], *Jam-e-Jam Daily*, January 24, 2016.

both parties.<sup>11</sup> The Iranian ambassador to China during the Ahmadinejad presidential tenure (2005–13) argues that since “no one should put all eggs in one basket,” Iran should not neglect its old ally China just because of the potential for Iran-West rapprochement after the nuclear agreement.<sup>12</sup>

### THE DEBATE OVER CHINA’S ECONOMIC RECORD IN IRAN

Increasingly, China finds itself at the forefront of debates in Iran about the country’s economic future. The main controversy can be traced back to December 2007, during archconservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s tenure as president of the Islamic Republic. In July 2006 the United Nations imposed sanctions in response to Iran’s ongoing nuclear program, and by December 2007 most European petroleum companies (such as France’s Total) had withdrawn from Iran. The China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) thus became the primary foreign contractor working with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) to develop Iranian gas and oil fields. Due to the absence of competition from other global leading oil corporations, the CNPC all but monopolized the Iranian oil and gas industry for several years, with Ahmadinejad’s blessing.

However, CNPC leeway in Iran considerably narrowed down as soon as reformist Hassan Rouhani assumed the presidential mantle in August 2013. Citing CNPC delays in delivering on its infrastructural investment promises, the Rouhani administration terminated the agreement between the CNPC and the NIOC regarding the development of gas and oil fields in Pars-e Jenoubi and Azadegan in 2013 and 2014, respectively.<sup>13</sup> Some reformists argued that the delay of CNPC investment in Pars-e Jenoubi was because of the Chinese firm’s inexperience in the Iranian oil industry and the insufficiency of its technology compared with that of Western multinational corporations. In addition the CNPC is said to have broken its promises in the development of other oil fields.<sup>14</sup> It is estimated that the CNPC’s noncompliance led to a financial loss of over \$11 billion for Iran.<sup>15</sup> The pushback against such a high-profile Chinese company by Iran is significant given the strategic context of the relationship with China.

By comparing a similar agreement between the Iraqi government and the CNPC, reformist-inclined energy analyst Said Ghulamhussein Hassantash argues that the contract noncompliance of the Chinese company was directly related to

11. Ali-Reza Managhebi, “The Win-Win Trade with China” [in Farsi], *Jam-e-Jam Daily*, January 25, 2016.

12. Javad Mansouri, “Iran and China in the Post Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” [in Farsi], *Jam-e-Jam Daily*, January 23, 2016.

13. “The Chinese Oil Giant Was Expelled from Iran” [in Farsi], Meher News Agency, April 24, 2014.

14. S. Saidi, “The Enigma of the Chinese in Pars-e Jenoubi” [in Farsi], *Arman*, August 7, 2012.

15. Ibid.

the international sanctions in place at the time.<sup>16</sup> The CNPC's agreement with the Iraqi government met the deadline while China deliberately slowed down its progress in the exploration of Iranian gas and oil fields. Hassantash notes that this is because China faced a dilemma regarding Iran. He observes that over 50 percent of China's foreign investment in energy has been in North America and that because of the US sanctions China has been forced to choose between Iran and America. Hence, although China became the only international actor in Iran's energy sector during the sanctions, its hefty investments in the West inevitably restricted its activities in Iran.<sup>17</sup> The implication of Hassantash observations is that China would never pursue a pact with Iran in defiance of the United States because much more is at stake for China in terms of accessing developed economies as compared with access to the Iranian economy.

Consistent with this argument, other reformists severely censured the "Sini-cization" of the Iranian economy and especially the energy industry. Overreliance on Chinese investment is thought to have reduced the bargaining power of Iran because of the absence of Western competition. Beijing in these circumstances could dictate "the rules of the game."<sup>18</sup> In contrast to the portrayal of China as a strategic partner by the conservatives, the reformists asserted that in the postsanctions era, the reformist administration of Hassan Rouhani must reduce the presence of China in the Iranian oil and gas sectors.<sup>19</sup>

Although in the last year of Ahmadinejad's tenure, the Iranian oil minister, Rostam Ghasemi, threatened to dislodge the CNPC from Pars-e Jenoubi, the reformist commentator Narges Rasouli argued that the oil minister's threat should not be taken seriously, given the "special relationship" between Iranian conservatives and China.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, the victory of the reformists in the presidential election of 2013 resulted in the termination of a "bad contract" with the CNPC. The Chinese company was also accused of handing over sensitive information about the oil field in Pars-e Jenoubi, which is jointly operated, to the Iraqi government.<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, following the lifting of the sanctions, Rouhani's administration strenuously endeavored to lure Western oil corporations back to invest in the oil and gas industry.

Faced with the acute criticism of the reformists, the conservatives implicitly confessed that the Chinese government had broken its promises. However, they argued that the Chinese side's violation of the agreement is due to their lack of

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16. Saed Ghulam Hussein Hassantash, "China's Need for Energy and the Security of the Persian Gulf" [in Farsi], *Etemad Daily*, January 11, 2014.

17. Ibid.

18. Reza Zandi, "The Seventh Night in Oil" [in Farsi], *Shargh Daily*, September 3, 2011.

19. Narges Rasouli, "The Seven-Year Presence of the Yellow Dragons in Asalouyeh" [in Farsi], *Etemad Daily*, May 1, 2014.

20. Ibid.

21. *Etemad Daily*, August 5, 2014; also *Donye-e Eghtesad Daily*, August 5, 2014.



experience, not to their exploiting of Western sanctions. A conservative analyst suggested that in the last several years Chinese energy companies “have enhanced their technological capacity and financial power” by trial and error, to the extent that they can compete with transnational oil corporations. Hence, for the conservatives, the presence of China in Iran’s energy sector is important; the realization of such agreements with Chinese corporations will require considerable patience and understanding by their Iranian counterparts.<sup>22</sup>

### THE IRANIAN DEBATE OVER THE IMPACT OF CHINESE CONSUMER GOOD IMPORTS

Iranian merchants and business leaders generally mock Chinese products as of inferior quality and Iranian popular perceptions of goods labeled “Made in China” are similarly negative.<sup>23</sup> Yet in the early 2010s, the Iranian market became saturated with Chinese products. During the presidency of Ahmadinejad, nearly \$40 billion of Chinese goods, from motor vehicles to traditional Iranian handicrafts, were imported to Iran,<sup>24</sup> and this trend has continued during Rouhani’s presidency.<sup>25</sup>

The conservatives generally try to defend the quality of Chinese products and the trade between the two nations. For example, the economist Ali Sarzaeem notes that the quality of imported products is not decided by Chinese producers but by Iranian merchants. As China exports many high-end products to the United States and to European markets, tarring all Chinese goods with the same brush is unjustifiable.<sup>26</sup> Actually, according to Sarzaeem, the Iranian embassy in Beijing requested that the Chinese government verify the quality of exported goods based on the standardization administration of the People’s Republic of China. Sarzaeem alleges that smugglers have been trafficking in low-quality Chinese products from third-party sources such as Dubai.<sup>27</sup>

Some conservatives, however, agree that the abundance of Chinese goods in Iran does diminish the policy of economic self-reliance originally aimed at offsetting Western sanctions and that most of the low-end consumer products could have been produced locally. Indeed, they admit that this has led to bankruptcy

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22. Zeba Esmaili, “The Long Shadow of China in the Iranian Oil Industry” [in Farsi], *Jam-e Jam Daily*, June 10, 2012.

23. Mohammed Hussein Aliakbari, “China, the Leading Producer of Denaturant Goods” [in Farsi], *Jam-e-Jam Daily*, January 19, 2016.

24. Ibid.

25. Mohammed Hussein Aliakbari, “The Damage Chinese Products Do to the Policy of Resistant Economy” [in Farsi], *Jam-e-Jam Daily*, January 2, 2016.

26. Ali Sarzaeem, “We and the Quality of Chinese Products” [in Farsi], *Jahan-e-Sanat Daily*, September 16, 2016.

27. Ibid.



for numerous domestic factories in the clothing and home-appliance sectors, as well as increasing youth unemployment in the country.<sup>28</sup>

Although the reformists agree that some Iranian merchants did play a negative role in importing Chinese low-quality products, they focus their criticisms on Chinese producers, particularly in the Iranian car market.<sup>29</sup> It was estimated that China would have increased its share from 1 percent in 2011 to around 9 percent in 2016 by exporting 1.17 million cars to Iran annually.<sup>30</sup> This dramatic increase forced some to conclude that “if the trend of importing Chinese cars continues at the same rate in the future, the entire Iranian car market will be conquered by low-quality cheap Chinese products.”<sup>31</sup> Worse still, they pointed out that almost all Chinese cars exported to developing countries, including Iran, have a “desirable appearance,” yet their “quality and safety” is extremely low.<sup>32</sup> Some even attribute Iran’s horrific traffic accident casualties (18,000 deaths and 310,000 injuries annually) to the abundance of low-quality Chinese cars.<sup>33</sup>

From the standpoint of reformists, the lifting of sanctions presents a valuable opportunity for Tehran to hedge against economic overreliance on China. However, even the reformists agree that Iran can benefit from advanced Chinese technology, specifically in such technical fields as electronics and hybrid cars.<sup>34</sup>

#### MUSLIMS UNITED OR NOT? UNREST IN XINJIANG IN THE IRANIAN DISCOURSE

Some of the strongest disagreements regarding China between different factions in Iran’s political structure date back to the Xinjiang disturbances in 2009. At that time, the tension between reformists and conservatives was at a high level following the outcome of Iran’s tenth presidential election. The conservatives cautiously criticized China’s long-term policy toward ethnic Uyghurs in its Xinjiang province, but they emphasized that the root of the problems there was not simply religious but a complex combination of “history, ethnicity, and religion aggravated by poverty, unemployment, social breakdown, political chaos, and more importantly, US interference.”<sup>35</sup> They averred that the ultimate goal of the Uyghurs’

28. G. Farahani, “The Unemployment of Iranians Due to China’s Low-Quality Goods” [in Farsi], *Borhan News*, March 2, 2011.

29. “The Presence of China in Iran’s Car Industry” [in Farsi], *Donye-e Eghtesad*, January 6, 2015.

30. “The Shadow of the Chinese Octopus on the Iranian Car Industry” [in Farsi], *Fardanews*, May 17, 2015.

31. Mahadi Zahedi, “What Should We Do with Chinese Car Making?” [in Farsi], *Jahan-e-Eghtesad Daily*, January 23, 2016.

32. “An Analysis of Chinese Dominance in the Iranian Car Market” [in Farsi], *Dana News*, May 8, 2016.

33. Shahtau Naseri, “The Lausanne Agreement and Its Impact on the Chinese Spectre in the Car Industry” [in Farsi], *Ireconomy Online*, April 5, 2015.

34. Ahmad Farhadi, “Does China Make Us Car Producers?” [in Farsi], *Shargh Daily*, May 4, 2014.

35. Fariborz Darjezi, “Behind the Xinjiang Scenario” [in Farsi], *Jam-e-Jam Daily*, November 4, 2009.

struggle is not separation from China and that the cause of Uyghur separatism had been purposely exaggerated in the Western media.<sup>36</sup>

In the most vitriolic attack on the Iranian reformist stance regarding Xinjiang, an unsigned editorial in *Kayhan* (Iran's leading conservative newspaper) argued that the reformists blindly copied arguments from that Western media: "There is a political front in Iran for which the essence or the sides of the struggle are meaningless. The goal is to dovetail with the West in any shape or form. Without deep reflection, they blindly follow the interests of the West. Although the majority of the deaths are of non-Muslims, the reformist media claims that all deaths in Xinjiang are of Muslims. Instead of real support for Uyghur Muslims, they ape the analyses of the Western media."<sup>37</sup> According to the editorial, the reformists thus had two goals in mind: first, to create an artificial tension between the Ahmadi-nejad administration and China and, second, to discredit conservatives by attributing a hypocritical position to them, namely, supporting Muslims in Gaza while supposedly snubbing Uyghurs in China. For the conservatives, the real danger was the threat of growing Islamophobia in the West, not Xinjiang. Hence, rather than severely criticizing China, they outlined several initiatives the Chinese government could implement in order to improve the conditions of Muslims in Xinjiang.

Some reformists for their part argued that, over the last few decades, the Chinese government has skewed the demography of Xinjiang at the expense of Uyghurs and in favor of Han Chinese and that it has increased the level of suppression toward the Uyghurs in the name of the "war on terror" following 9/11.<sup>38</sup> The reformists insisted it was wrong of Iran to make a distinction between Palestinian and Uyghur suffering. They charged that in its coverage of the Xinjiang conflict, the government news agency IRNA "acted as a part of the Chinese Communist Party news agency."<sup>39</sup> By comparing the much lengthier media coverage of an Islamophobic incident in Germany with the suppression of the Uyghurs in China, the reformists reiterated that Iranian conservatives discriminated between Muslim communities around the world out of political expediency.<sup>40</sup>

### IRANIAN PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA'S "NEW CONFUCIANISM"

In December 2015, the Confucius Institute at the University of Tehran was established to promote Chinese-language instruction and culture in Iran. Accord-

36. Ibid.

37. "The Whip of Support for Chinese Muslims Is in the Hands of the US" [in Farsi], *Kayhan Daily*, July 15, 2009.

38. Hadi Firouzi, "The War on Terror Is an Excuse for Suppression" [in Farsi], *Shargh Daily*, September 14, 2015.

39. "Government Passivity Regarding the Killing of Muslims in China" [in Farsi], *Mardomsalari News*, July 13, 2016.

40. A. Mohebi, "The Velvet Revolution in Xinjiang" [in Farsi], *Mardomsalari*, July 12, 2009.

ing to think tanks and newspapers close to both Iranian reformists and conservatives, the Chinese government was trying to appeal to local public opinion to improve China's image abroad.<sup>41</sup>

For most reformist commentators, however, the war-averse and pacifist Confucian image that modern China is appropriating amounts to nothing but a means of securing China's own economic growth and expansion of its political influence. Beijing is seen to be investing capital to foreground its peaceful intentions not just in Iran but also in other countries in Central Asia as a means of facilitating the building of a "New Silk Road" essential for its economic growth.<sup>42</sup> They argue that China's public diplomacy could be seen as "realpolitik with the taste of Confucianism."<sup>43</sup>

Contrary to the reformists, who are typically suspicious of China's intentions, the conservatives have been more receptive to the language of "New Confucianism" emanating from Beijing. For instance, by linking coverage of Chinese attempts to establish Confucius Institutes with aid for the construction of mosques and religious institutions in the Muslim world,<sup>44</sup> conservatives cast a favorable light on China as an Islam-friendly rising global power working for the common good, unlike the United States.

Saed Mohammad Ali Hussein, the Iranian foreign ministry spokesman during Ahmadinejad's presidency,<sup>45</sup> praised Beijing as "one of the most active players in international public diplomacy." Nevertheless, Hussein challenged China not just to reduce the role of diplomacy to promoting Chinese values and portraying itself as "civilized, cultured and popular" but also to play a more active role alongside its allies, notably Iran and possibly Russia, for regional and global security. To fulfill this objective, he asserted that China must harness its popularity in the Gulf Arab states—especially after 9/11 and the declining popularity of the United States in the Middle East—and that it must put pressure on Saudi Arabia in particular so that Riyadh cut its direct and indirect support to "terrorist groups." Hussein concluded that the "deceptive" Western coalition against the Islamic State (ISIS), with Saudi backing, should not be trusted. Instead, China must revise its conservative pacifism and join Iran for "a serious, effective, comprehensive and honest fight against terrorism."<sup>46</sup>

41. For a Western point of view on China's soft-power enhancement efforts, see David Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2015): 99–107.

42. "The Presence of China in Central Asia and the Challenges Ahead" [in Farsi], *Fardanews*, April 6, 2016.

43. Arash Azizi, "Realpolitik with the Taste of Confucianism" [in Farsi], *Shargh Daily*, June 27, 2011.

44. "The Influence of China's Public Diplomacy Is Growing in the Muslim World" [in Farsi], Fars News Agency, February 19, 2012.

45. He was a member of the Ahmadinejad's foreign policy team between September 2006 and July 2008.

46. S. M. A. Hussein, "Beijing, the Most Active Player in International Public Diplomacy" [in Farsi], Meher News Agency, January 24, 2016.

While China's successes in offsetting Western "propaganda" were celebrated by some Iranian conservatives, it was also suggested that more must be done by China to become an established cultural power in the coming years. According to some Iranian conservatives, Beijing will need to make huge investments to attract wider foreign audiences and reshape global public opinion in the future.<sup>47</sup>

## STRATEGIC RELATIONS

As noted a dozen years ago in John Garver's pioneering study, Chinese and Iranian elites often proclaim common ground in that both countries are heirs to great civilizations that never went to war with one another. Both modern states had been overwhelmed by Western imperialism in the nineteenth century, and they share a sense of "humiliation" as a result.<sup>48</sup>

For China, Iran stands out as a counterweight to excessive American influence in the Middle East and a possible source of leverage in support of China's expanding interests in the region.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, China and Iran have to face the reality that the United States remains the most important country influencing their well-being in one way or another, and thus China's policy vis-à-vis Iran depends on the state of its relationship with the United States.<sup>50</sup> It has to pursue its courtship of Iran within the framework of Sino-American amity and cooperation.<sup>51</sup> The overall guideline for China's Iran policy is still very much the notion that China's leaders do not want to have to choose between the United States and Iran.<sup>52</sup>

It should be stressed that China and Iran's interests vis-à-vis the United States differ greatly even if they share a common rhetorical facade denouncing US hegemony.<sup>53</sup> China has been facing a dilemma with regard to its Iran policy; namely, "Chinese leaders have to painfully balance their impulse toward economic cooperation with Iran against other vital interests, including convincing Washington

47. "Public Diplomacy as China's Means of Influence on the International Arena" [in Farsi], *Al-Waght*, May 7, 2015.

48. John W. Garver, introduction to *China and Iran*, and also "China and Iran: Expanding Cooperation under Conditions of US Domination," in *Toward Well-oiled Relations? China's Presence in the Middle East following the Arab Spring*, ed. Niv Horesh (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 180.

49. Michael D. Swaine, "Beijing's Tightrope Walk on Iran," *China Leadership Monitor* 33 (2010): 2.

50. Lounnas Djallil, "China and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis: Between Ambiguities and Interests," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 10 (2011): 227.

51. John W. Garver, "China-Iran Relations: Cautious Friendship within America's Nemesis," *China Report* 49, no. 1 (2013): 86.

52. Shen Dingli, "Iran's Nuclear Ambitions Test China's Wisdom," *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2006): 63.

53. Marybeth Davis, James Lecky, Torrey Froscher, David Chen, Abel Kerevel, and Stephen Schlaikjer, "China-Iran: A Limited Partnership," report prepared for the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 49; Scott Harold and Alireza Nader, "China and Iran: Economic, Political and Military Relations," RAND Occasional Paper (2012), 21.

that China is not a peer competitor or a challenger, but a responsible stakeholder and strategic partner.”<sup>54</sup>

When dealing with Iran, China has strong incentives to avoid actions that antagonize the West in general and the United States in particular. Thus, notwithstanding its rhetorical support of Iran’s bid for membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the joint agreement reached in January 2016, China declined to support Iran’s accession to the SCO in June 2016, fearing it might give the SCO a strong anti-Western flavor.<sup>55</sup>

In concrete terms, China over the last decade proved instrumental in bringing Iran’s nuclear program to heel, largely by abiding by Western sanctions against Iran, even though it had been complicit in providing the Iranians with sensitive technological know-how earlier in the 1990s. For that reason, despite China’s ongoing arms sales to Iran, it would be a mistake to overstate the degree of strategic coordination between the two countries.<sup>56</sup>

The Iranian defense minister and his Chinese counterpart signed an agreement in November 2016 pledging closer military cooperation in a number of areas including military training and counterterrorism operations. Both sides also pledged to hold joint military exercises.<sup>57</sup> However, this agreement should not be understood as a treaty, and there are many steps between cooperation in training, exercises, dialogues, and so on, and forming a comprehensive military alliance. Even Iran’s conservatives do not seem to contend otherwise.

Chinese sources indicate China’s primary interest in collaboration with Iran remains economic. China has been Iran’s top trading partner since 2009.<sup>58</sup> Given China’s rising demand for oil and gas, energy trade will continue to play a significant role underpinning China-Iran relations for decades to come.<sup>59</sup> Economic integration will be boosted under China’s much touted “One Belt, One Road” initiative, with a Yiwu-Tehran train route launched in January 2016 symbolically reviving the route of the ancient Silk Road between China and Iran.<sup>60</sup>

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54. Zhao Hong, “China’s Dilemma on Iran: Between Energy Security and a Responsible Rising Power,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 87 (2013): 209–10.

55. Reuters, “China-Led Bloc Keeps Iran at Arm’s Length despite Russian Backing,” June 23, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-uzbekistan-sco-idUSKCN0Z9213>; Kevjn Lim, “Iran’s Shanghai Dream: The Perks and Pitfalls of Joining China’s Security Club,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 25, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2016-07-25/irans-shanghai-dream>.

56. Yitzhak Shichor, “Iran after the Sanctions: The Marginalisation of China,” *Note Observatoire Chine* (2015–16): 1–5.

57. See <http://thediplomat.com/2016/11/iran-china-sign-military-cooperation-agreement/>.

58. Liu Jun and Wu Wei, “Key Issues in China-Iran Relations,” *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2010): 43.

59. Garver, “China and Iran,” 180.

60. See <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/iran-china-and-the-silk-road-train/>.

China's relationship with Iran is arguably its most intimate and most problematic bilateral partnership in the Middle East.<sup>61</sup> It remains a marriage of convenience glued by pragmatic interests.<sup>62</sup> Economic interests cannot automatically translate into good feelings. In fact, surveys show that a majority of the Chinese public have an unfavorable view of Iran.<sup>63</sup> China-Iran relations have so far predominantly been driven by the governments of these two countries, and the weak sociocultural foundation of their relations may prevent China and Iran from fostering a truly trustworthy partnership.

### THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT'S PERCEPTION OF IRAN

This section systematically analyzes the Chinese government's perception of Iran based on all the relevant news reports published in Chinese in *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日报) since early 2012. *People's Daily* has served as the official voice of the Chinese government and is thus the best platform from which to elicit the Chinese government's perceptions of Iran. After initial screening, we found 60 lengthy substantive articles published between January 2012 and July 2016 that contained editorial and strategic insights beyond mere day-to-day narration of current affairs.

From reading these 60 reports it became clear that Iran's nuclear program has been the Chinese government's foremost concern. On the one hand, China has continued to stress its sympathy for Iran's right to develop nuclear energy for civilian purposes.<sup>64</sup> This is meaningful because China opposes the development of even civilian nuclear technology when it comes to its pariah neighbor-cum-ally, North Korea.<sup>65</sup> Yet, in line with the United States, the Chinese government opposes Iran's development of nuclear weapons.

Unlike the United States, China has always been opposed to unilateral economic sanctions and any threat of military force against Iran and instead insists that dialogue and negotiation are the only viable way to resolve the Iran nuclear issue. *People's Daily* commentators stressed that Iran's economy paid a heavy

61. Jon B. Alterman, "China's Balancing Act in the Gulf," Gulf Analysis Paper (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2013), 4.

62. Nicolo Nourafchan argues that China has pursued a grand strategy of opportunistic pragmatism to manage its relations with both Iran and the United States. See Nicolo Nourafchan, "Constructive Partner or Menacing Threat? Analyzing China's Role in the Iran Nuclear Program," *Asian Security* 6, no. 1 (2010): 28–50.

63. According to surveys conducted by Pew Research Center, a majority of Chinese citizens (58 percent in 2013 and 55 percent in 2014) have an unfavorable view of Iran. See Pew Research Center, "Global Views of Iran Overwhelmingly Negative," June 11, 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2013/06/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Project-Iran-Report-FINAL-June-11-2013.pdf>, 3, and "Iran's Global Image Largely Negative," June 18, 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/06/18/irans-global-image-largely-negative/>.

64. See, e.g., Du Shangze and Pei Guangjiang, "Xi Jinping tong Yilang zongtong juxing huitan" [Xi Jinping held talk with the Iranian president], *Renmin Ribao*, May 23, 2014.

65. Alterman and Garver, *The Vital Triangle*, 47.



price for its nuclear program due to tough US-led economic sanctions, as evidenced by high unemployment and rising prices and inflation.<sup>66</sup> China often declared its willingness to play a constructive role in helping resolve the Iran nuclear issue.<sup>67</sup>

By and large, the Chinese government has maintained a very positive view as regards its economic relations with Iran. *People's Daily* semantic frequency suggests “economic” (经济) rather than military considerations can be deemed the most important driver for China-Iran relations. It is noteworthy that the Chinese government believes that China and Iran’s economies are highly complementary in their comparative advantages.<sup>68</sup>

“Cooperation” (合作) and “friendship” (友好) are often invoked to describe China-Iran relations. Beijing is keen to highlight the longevity of the relationship, pointing out that since establishing diplomatic relations in 1971 China and Iran have continued to deepen and broaden their cooperation in almost every field and that their friendship has endured in good times and bad.<sup>69</sup> Yet equally important, none of the *People's Daily* reports signals the relations might yield an important military dimension. On the contrary, they seem in effect to quash Iran’s conservatives’ hopes that such a qualitative leap in the type of relations can come about under current circumstances.

#### CHINESE SCHOLARS’ PERCEPTIONS OF IRAN

We also undertook a detailed content analysis of articles published in core Chinese academic journals between 2012 and 2016 and Chinese books concerning China-Iran relations. The compilation method involved highly-related article matches based on the China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database search functionality.

In total, some 204 articles dedicated to the subject were published in core Chinese journals between 2012 and 2017. After deleting lateral material, we identified 38 highly relevant lengthier articles and eight scholarly books published between 2012 and 2016. From these we distil the main thrust of the perceptions of Iran on the assumption that Chinese scholars can expect more freedom of expression than in the *People's Daily* or the state-controlled mass media.

66. See, e.g., Wang Rujun, “Hefengbao wei chuiluan Yilangren pingjing shenghuo” [The nuclear storm did not disturb Iranian people’s peaceful life], *Renmin Ribao*, February 22, 2012.

67. See, e.g., Mou Zongcong, Zhang Yang, Wu lejun, Huang Peizhao, Shi Xiaohui, Peng Min, and Zheng Qi, “Gefang weirao Yilang hewenti shangyan chuansuo waijiao” [All involved countries conducted shuttle diplomacy regarding Iran nuclear issue], *Renmin Ribao*, January 20, 2012.

68. “Gongchuang ZhongYi guanxi meihao mingtian” [Working together to create a beautiful tomorrow for China-Iran relations], *Renmin Ribao*, January 22, 2016.

69. See, e.g., Li Weihong, “Wu Bangguo kaishi dui Yilang jinxing zhengshi youhao fangwen” [Wu Bangguo will pay a friendly visit to Iran], *Renmin Ribao*, September 10, 2012; Tan Jingjing, “Zhang Gaoli huijian Yilang jingji shiwu yu caizhengbu buzhang” [Zhang Gaoli met with Iranian economic affairs and finance minister], *Renmin Ribao*, April 23, 2014.



In line with the Chinese government's perception of Iran, Chinese scholars largely accept that Iran occupies a crucial geostrategic location in the Middle East greatly impacting China's energy security; Iran straddles the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, areas that contain the world's two richest oil and gas reserves, with the Strait of Hormuz within range of its control.<sup>70</sup> Second, Iran and China's western frontiers are connected across the Zagros and Hindu Kush mountain ranges and the Himalayas. Given such a geostrategic location, Iran can be seen as a bridge-head safeguarding the security of China's western frontier, China's first "firewall" against potential Western expansion.<sup>71</sup>

Third, in light of Iran's position as the largest Shi'a Muslim country in the world, China regards it as strategically important. Iran is the unquestioned leader of the Shi'a bloc which competes for influence with the Sunni bloc led by Saudi Arabia. Iran has expanded and solidified its geopolitical interests across the Middle East in recent years due to US military blunders in the region. Iran's religious geostrategy is deemed defensive rather than offensive in nature and is a rational response to external pressure.<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, Iran and Turkey are considered as the "dual core" of the geopolitics of the Middle East.<sup>73</sup> On the one hand, Iran is an important player not only in dealing with the divisive Iraqi and Syrian issues but also in helping resolve Afghanistan's security issues and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the other hand, Iran's long-standing confrontation with the United States is seen by Chinese scholars as a thorny factor, presenting both opportunities and challenges for China's expanding interests in the Middle East. Notably, they concede that the US-Iran confrontation has slowed down the United States' pivot to the Asia Pacific, thereby greatly alleviating China's strategic pressure from the United States.<sup>74</sup> And this admission by Chinese scholars arguably dovetails with Iranian reformists' concerns about opportunism in China's foreign policy and insincerity in its pro-Iran "civilizational" rhetoric.

70. See, e.g., Wen-Sheng Chen, "China's Oil Strategy: 'Going Out' to Iran," *Asian Politics & Policy* 2, no. 1 (2010): 42.

71. See, e.g., Zhang Wenmu, "Tiantang hen yuan, Zhongguo que hen jin: Zhongguo yu zhoubian Guojia he diqu de Di yuan zhengzhi hudong Guili he tedian" [Paradise is far away, but China is nearby: A study on geopolitics between China and its neighboring countries and regions and the law of their interaction], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [Journal of world economics and politics] 1 (2013): 33–34.

72. See, e.g., Jin Liangxiang, "Houxieyi [后协议] shidai Yilang de zhanlue diwei he Zhongyi guanxi" [Iran's strategic position in the postagreement era and China-Iran relations], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi luntan* [Forum of world economics and politics] 1 (2016): 38–39.

73. Chen Junhua and Ma Junyi, "Zhongdong diyuan zhengzhi xingju yu Yilang weiji" [New geopolitical situation in the Middle East and the Iranian nuclear crisis], *Shijie dili yanjiu* [World regional studies] 22, no. 1 (2013): 23–24; Shen Changcheng, Chen Junhua, Gao Lei, and Yu Ling, "Zhongdong diyuan zhengzhi huanjing dui Yilang jueqi de yingxiang qianxi" [Analysis of Mideast geopolitical environment's influence on Iran's rise], *Shijie dili yanjiu* [World regional studies], 24, no. 2 (2015): 33–34.

74. See, e.g., Hua Liming, "Yilang hewenti yu Zhongguo zhongdong waijiao" [The Iran nuclear issue and China's Middle East diplomacy], *Alabo shijie yanjiu* [Arab world studies], 6 (2014): 12–15.

Chinese scholars broadly reaffirm the official view that economic cooperation remains the overriding rationale for improved bilateral relations, and they discount the potential for closer military ties. Interestingly, in a mirror image of Iranian reformist views, a number of these Chinese scholars nevertheless blame China's growing reliance on Iranian oil and gas as creating lopsided trade in recent years. They note that China's economic dependence on Iran has risen, while Iran's economic dependence on China has decreased.<sup>75</sup>

Several scholars note Iran's chances of becoming an economic powerhouse in the Middle East improved after the comprehensive nuclear agreement was reached in Vienna in 2015.<sup>76</sup> The US-led economic sanctions seriously damaged Iran's economy, thereby softening Iran's stance in the nuclear talks, and the success of the negotiations will bring new opportunities to deepen China-Iran economic cooperation, since American pressure on both China and Iran has lessened.<sup>77</sup> Although Iran has a strategic location for infrastructural connections between Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Chinese scholars warn their government that China should not take Iran's support of the One Belt, One Road initiative for granted. Iran has always cherished its own way of development and hence has taken a cautious stance on cooperating with China on this initiative.<sup>78</sup> China should try to find common ground to promote cooperation with Iran compatible with Iran's own economic and political situation.<sup>79</sup>

Akin to *People's Daily* coverage, most of the academic articles focus on the nuclear issue seeing it as a typical political problem relating to the troubled relations between the United States and Iran. In Chinese eyes, Iran is an enemy created by the United States.<sup>80</sup> Some contend Iran was attempting to develop nuclear weap-

75. Yang Xingli, Ji Kaiyun, Chen Junhua, and Yang Shanshan, *Xiandai Zhongguo yu Yilang guanxi* [Modern relations between China and Iran] (Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe, 2012), 154–61; Fan Hongda, *Yilang yu Meiguo: Cong pengyou dao diren* [Iran and the United States: From friend to enemy] (Beijing: Xinhua Chubanshe, 2012), 205–6.

76. Jin Liangxiang, "Houxieyi [后协议] shidai," 39–41.

77. Tian Wenlin, "ZhongYi guanxi: Hexieyi qianshu dailai xinjiyu" [China-Iran relations: Conclusion of the nuclear agreement brings new opportunities], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary international relations] 12 (2015): 4; Cai Penghong, "Meiguo zhicai Yilang jiqi dui Zhongguo de yingxiang" [The US's sanction on Iran and its influence on China], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary international relations] 4 (2012): 19–20.

78. Lu Jin, "Lishi yu xianshi shiquexia de ZhongYi hezuo: Jiyou Yilangren dui yidai yilu renzhi de jiedu" [China-Iran cooperation in history and modern times: An explanation based on Iranian views of the "Belt and Road" initiative], *Xiya Feizhou* [West Asia and Africa] 6 (2015): 60.

79. Fan Hongda, "Zhongguo zai Yilang tuijin 'Yidai Yilu' zhanlue changyi de zhengzhi huanjing yu yinying" [China's "Belt and Road" initiative in Iran: Political environment and coping style], *Xiya Feizhou* [West Asia and Africa] 2 (2016): 63.

80. See, e.g., He Fan, "Guoke Zhongde Yilang" [Iran in a nutshell], *Guoji jingji pinglun* [International economic review] 5 (2012): 64; Chen Jinwen and Niu Xinchun, "MeiYi huanhe qiandong Zhongdong zhanlue geju" [The US-Iran rapprochement impacts the Middle Eastern strategic configuration], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary international relations] 12 (2013): 26.

ons for the sake of its survival in the face of American hostility.<sup>81</sup> The United States is also accused of applying double standards: before 1979, the United States was the earliest supporter of Iran's development of a civilian nuclear capability. In Chinese scholars' view, the United States' double standard is best demonstrated by its tacit acceptance of Israel's nuclear weapons but strong opposition to Iran's nuclear program.<sup>82</sup> However, a number of Chinese scholars warn that Iran aims to challenge the current US-dominated order and then expand its influence in the Middle East by attempting to develop nuclear weapons, which has aroused deep apprehensions of the United States and its long-standing allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.<sup>83</sup>

The level of concern raised in Chinese scholarly sources about this exceeds what is found in *People's Daily*. The vitriol Iranian conservatives habitually pour on Israel's right to exist is subtly frowned on here.<sup>84</sup> In that sense, too, one can easily identify wishful thinking in Iranian conservatives' hopes for a strategic breakthrough in relations with China.

#### CHINESE SCHOLARS ON IRAN'S DOMESTIC POLITICS, SOCIETY, AND CULTURE

In the eyes of Chinese scholars, Iran has become more and more secular and pragmatic, despite continuing pressure from conservative Islamists in the regime and the imposition of Islamic laws and regulations on society. It is argued that Iranian society is not an oppressed and closed society as is its popular image in the Western media. Instead, it is cast as dynamic, young, secular, and full of vitality.<sup>85</sup> In addition, it is argued that there are extensive debates over Iran's domestic and foreign policies. Most Iranian people, in particular students, do not embrace anti-Americanism, and a growing force within the government is inclined to improve Iran's relations with the United States.<sup>86</sup> The Islamic theocracy has sought to maintain its political legitimacy by relying more on economic performance and

81. See, e.g., Yue Hanjing, *Aobama zhengfu dui Yilang de jiechu zhengce yanjiu* [Research on the Obama administration's "engagement policy" toward Iran] (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2014), 169.

82. See, e.g., Guo Xiangang, "Zhongdong wuhua: Pojie Yihe wenti de chulu" [The Middle East denuclearization: Break the deadlock of the Iran nuclear issue], *Guoji wenti yanjiu* [China international studies] 3 (2013): 130; Fan Hongda, *Yilang yu Meiguo*, 193.

83. See, e.g., Liu Qiang, Tian Wenlin, Sun Degang, and Huang Rihan, "Yilang hewei de shizhi yu qianjing" [The essence and outlook of the Iranian nuclear crisis], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi luntan* [Forum of world economics and politics] 2 (2012): 165–66; Wu Cheng, *Yilang hewenti yu shijie geju zhuanxing* [The Iranian nuclear issue and the world pattern transformation] (Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe, 2014), 50.

84. See, e.g., Xiao Xian, "Yiluyidai shijiaoxia de Zhongguo yu Yiselie guanxi" [Sino-Israeli relations through the OBOR prism], *Xiya Feizhou* [West Asia and Africa] 2 (2016): 91–108.

85. See, e.g., Wang Wen, "Yilang shidi kaochahou de zongjie" [A summary after conducting the fieldwork in Iran], *Hongqi wengao* [Red-flag essays] (2012): 34.

86. Fan Hongda, "Zhongguo zai Yilang," 61.

improvement of people's livelihood and less on a revolutionary path emphasizing Islamic ideology and anti-Americanism.<sup>87</sup> In their writings on this, Chinese scholars seem to favor reduced US-Iran tensions, which will allow China to deepen economic relations with Iran without provoking Washington's ire. There is no basis in the scholarly literature from which to infer that stronger military bonds between China and Iran might be imminent or desirable.

In spite of incessant competition between the different political factions in Iran, there has been a consensus among Chinese scholars that the theocratic regime is more durable than it might appear in the West. Chinese sources allege that prejudice and misunderstanding in the West paint Iran's Islamic theocracy as backward, but in fact, the supreme leader cannot wield power unconditionally and has only limited control over Iran's domestic and foreign policies. Chinese scholars cast Iran's theocratic regime as historically grounded in—and compatible with—Iran's social and political conditions.<sup>88</sup>

Nevertheless, Chinese scholars concede that the people of China and Iran still have a limited understanding of each other's society and culture. Popular animosity can surface from time to time: during the 2009 unrest known as Iran's failed "green revolution," for example, some demonstrators reportedly chanted "death to China."<sup>89</sup> More recently, many ordinary people in Iran have embraced a more negative perception of China's One Belt, One Road initiative than have Iranian officials and scholars.<sup>90</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Conventional wisdom in the West is that China-Iran relations are in effect constrained by Beijing's reluctance to risk instability in its relations with Washington. The assumption is that Beijing can be called to order by Washington whenever particular facets of its economic ties with Tehran carry a worrisome geostrategic potential. Iran and China's bilateral relations are far from ironclad, not least because of Chinese worries that large-scale investments in Iran might alienate other countries, as well as Iranian concerns about overreliance on the Chinese market.<sup>91</sup>

87. Xiong Lili and Yan Zhanyu, "Yilang zhengzhi hefaxing zhuanxing yu MeiYi guanxi zhong Yiselie yinsu zaijiedu" [Iran's political legitimacy transition and reinterpretation of the Israel factor in US-Iran relations], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi luntan* [Forum of world economics and politics] 5 (2015): 4–5.

88. Jin Liangxiang, "Yilang de lingxiu zhiguo moshi chuyi" [An analysis of Iran's model of the supreme leader's rule], *Xiya Feizhou* [West Asia and Africa] 4 (2015): 41–42; Wu Cheng, *Yilang hewenti*, 86–87; Wang Zhenrong, "Yilang Yisilan Gongheguo zhengzhi tizhi yanjiu" [The political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran], *Alabo shijie yanjiu* [Arab world studies] 2 (2014): 64.

89. Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, *China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 51.

90. Lu Jin, "Lishi yu Xianshi," 68.

91. Erica Downs and Suzanne Maloney, "Getting China to Sanction Iran: The Chinese-Iranian Oil Connection," *Foreign Affairs*, no. 2 (2011): 15–21.

We deem this assessment as largely correct but have delved deeper than in previous studies into Iranian domestic politics as an important factor in shaping bilateral relations.

Drawing on various Farsi-language sources, we have shown that the divide between reformists and conservatives in Iran translates into starkly bifurcating attitudes toward China. Several recurrent themes in this Iranian strategic discourse on China emerged. It is clear that reformists take China's pronouncements about civilizational affinity between the two countries with a grain of salt, and a few have gone as far as using ethnic tensions in Xinjiang to undermine China's Islam-friendly image, in defiance of Tehran's official stance. The upshot in reformist eyes is that China cannot be trusted as reliable ally and that preference should be given to Europe to break Tehran's diplomatic and economic isolation. While the conservatives largely aspire to deepen economic cooperation with China, reformists portray that cooperation as Chinese exploitation.

We also examined a large body of Chinese sources that tested the Iranian conservatives' optimistic assumptions about China's attitude. We found that Chinese sources do not lend support to the Iranian conservatives' hopes of expanding bilateral relations substantively beyond economics. Rather, concern is implicitly raised about Iran's confrontational approach to the United States (as well as to Saudi Arabia and Israel) and about Iran's desire for Middle Eastern supremacy on the back of nuclear capability. While Beijing has had to prioritize relations with Iran in order to bring about a peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis, it has been wary of deeper engagement due to China's need to maintain productive relations with the United States and its allies, China's assessment of the complexities of Iran's society and political system, and the fierce streak of independence prevalent among Iran's elite and populace.

Interestingly, both Iranian and Chinese sources suggest that the people-to-people dimension of the bilateral relations remains shallow. But Iranian conservatives and reformists alike laud China's economic achievements at home even if they are at variance about whether Chinese expertise can benefit Iran's manufacturing industry.

Our analysis of Chinese and Iranian views suggests that the two countries are not on the brink of upgrading their relationship into a military alliance. This is because China does not seem willing at this stage to risk its relations with the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel (in that order) and also because China's interest in Iran remains largely economic. In a broader sense, the economics of China's One Belt, One Road trump strategic considerations when it comes to Iran.<sup>92</sup> Equally, we reach this conclusion because Rouhani's Iran is intimating a wish for a thaw

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92. Flynt Leverett and Wu Bingbing, "The New Silk Road and China's Evolving Grand Strategy," *China Journal*, no. 77 (January 2017): 129–30.

of its relations with the West. The prevalent view of China during Ahmadinejad's presidency was of a natural strategic ally of the Islamic Republic, that is, as pro-Islamic, stability-minded, and anti-imperialistic. Under Rouhani, this view has been offset by more skeptical assessment.

As Iran accesses the West, it should need other powers less. Thus, even when they declare their admiration for China's economic development model and advocate the maintenance of friendly relations, Iranian reformists see Beijing at heart as an opportunistic actor in the international system whose ultimate goal is economic hegemony. Therefore, rather than a ground-breaking alliance-in-waiting, the agreement of November 2016—in which the Iranian defense minister and his Chinese counterpart pledged to hold joint military exercises in the near future—should be merely read as a tentative signal to the international community. The purpose thereof is to warn against renunciation by the West of the nuclear agreement.

Typically, conservative and reformist journalists spar over whether China is a boon to the Iranian economy or the mainspring of low-quality products that cripple local producers. In reality, these countering narratives seem, for the most part, to be merely a projection of a much more significant debate over attitudes to the West. Although China could play a leading role in the rehabilitation of the Iranian economy, the reformists, unlike the conservatives, are more interested in an Iranian-Western economic relationship. Perhaps for that reason, the fact that China is governed by an atheist, nominally Communist party is not an ideological argument that the conservative Islamic faction in Iranian politics is interested in foregrounding. While China-Iran bilateral relations have improved rather dramatically since the 1990s, and Iran has grown more dependent on the Chinese economy through exports of hydrocarbons and imports of goods and services, our foregoing analysis suggests that large segments of the Iranian elite and population still crave closer ties with the West, which they see the nuclear deal as facilitating. So, despite an appetite to widen areas of cooperation and partnership with China, relations not only remain transactional but arguably remain a function of both parties' reactive preoccupation with the United States and its policies.